

**PHYSICAL THERAPY BOARD OF CALIFORNIA**

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USE OF PREFIX, AFFIX, & SUFFIX

On May 20, 2003 the Physical Therapy Board of California adopted the below Advisory Letter Regarding 1398.12 Use of Prefix, Affix, & Suffix.

This letter is in response to your inquiry regarding the use of the title doctor (Dr) as a prefix and or the inclusion of initials to indicate the achievement of an academic degree following one's name, in both verbal and written communication. The Business and Professions Code contains two specific sections, one in the Medical Practice Act (2054) and one in the Physical Therapy Practice Act (2633) that address the use of the prefix Dr. and a suffix indicating an earned academic degree:

2054. (a) Any person who uses in any sign, business card, or letterhead, or, in an advertisement, the words "doctor" or "physician," the letters or prefix "Dr.," the initials "M.D.," or any other terms or letters indicating or implying that he or she is a physician and surgeon, physician, surgeon, or practitioner under the terms of this or any other law, or that he or she is entitled to practice hereunder, or who represents or holds himself or herself out as a physician and surgeon, physician, surgeon, or practitioner under the terms of this or any other law, without having at the time of so doing a valid, unrevoked, and unsuspended certificate as a physician and surgeon under this chapter, is guilty of a misdemeanor.

2633. A person holding a license as a physical therapist issued by the board may use the title "physical therapist" or the letters "P.T." or any other words, letters or figures which indicate that the person using same is a licensed physical therapist. No other person shall be so designated or shall use the term licensed or registered physical therapist, licensed or registered physiotherapist, licensed or registered physical therapy technician, or the letters "L.P.T.," "R.P.T.," or "P.T.". The license as a physical therapist shall not authorize the use of the prefix "Dr.," the word "doctor," or any suffix or affix indicating or implying that the licensed person is a doctor or a physician or surgeon. Notwithstanding this section, a licentiate of this chapter may use an initial or other suffix indicating possession of a specific academic degree earned at, and issued by, an institution accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges or any accrediting agency recognized by the National Commission on Accrediting or the United States Department of Education which the board determines is equivalent, except that the initials "M.D." shall not be used unless the licentiate is licensed as a physician and surgeon in this state.

These two sections make it clear that only a person licensed as a physician and surgeon may use the prefix "Dr", or any suffix that would indicate that they are licensed as such. Section 2633 of the code also clearly indicates that a physical therapist is entitled to use a suffix indicating that they have earned an academic degree, including one at the doctorate level. After reading the two sections it should also be abundantly clear that there is significant responsibility on any person using the prefix of "Dr", or a suffix indicating the earning of a doctorate degree, that no one is led to believe that they are a physician and surgeon unless they are so licensed.

Examples of proper usage in written communication would be:

- Dr. Jane Smith, Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Jane Smith, DPT

Examples of verbal communication would be “Hello, I am Dr. Jane Smith, and I will be your physical therapist.” In cases where the physical therapist is certain that all persons who could hear the conversation would know that Dr. Smith is a physical therapist and not a physician and surgeon, the disclaimer would not need to be included.

In conclusion, a physical therapist who uses the title “Dr” is responsible to make sure that no person believes that they are a physician and surgeon. In the event that a complaint is received by the Board that a physical therapist is representing themselves as a physician and surgeon, the fact the complainant has that belief would indicate that the physical therapist had not met the burden of responsibility.

Sincerely,

Steven K. Hartzell
Executive Officer